

Can we know when to trust our emotions in the pursuit of knowledge? Consider History and one other area of knowledge.

Emotions are a very powerful influence when encountering and analyzing new information. These emotions determine how we perceive a certain situation: positive or negative, good or bad, right or wrong. However, are those emotions always reliable? We trust and depend on our emotions every day, but should we? Through several examples in History and Ethics, we will see that emotions are not always as reliable as we would like them to be.

One of a historian's main aim is to be as objective as possible. Of course, the knowledge issue presents itself whether it is possible to truly be objective when studying History. Jung Chang gives an excellent example in her book *Wild Swans*. Here, she describes interviews of prisoners in Chinese labor camps held during Mao's reign. Their reports portrayed the government in a very positive light, saying they had 'enjoyed being denounced'¹. Chang describes her emotional reaction to have been immediate disbelief and criticism, due to her knowledge of people's fear of Mao. However, she explains that some foreigners took the reports at face value. They trusted the interviews as they had no reason to do otherwise. This shows that our emotions and thus our judgment of historical sources is very dependent on our gender, religion, political background and culture. This makes studying History objectively extremely difficult. To circumvent this personal bias, it is necessary to look at as many different aspects of these reports as possible. A historian would try to find out the prisoner's background, reasons for their imprisonment, the political situation of China and so on. Having gone through this reasoning approach, a historian can then, and only then, place more trust in his emotions on the subject as he has a firm foundation for them.

Another issue when studying History: Can we ever know the truth by simply reading about events? The problem of written information is that language used can heavily influence our emotional reactions to the subject. A classic example is the use of language in old American textbooks when referring to Native Americans. From 1956 – 76, several History books were reviewed to replace words such as 'ignorant savages' with 'noble savages', 'white-man's helper' or 'Indian maiden'. Obviously, a child learning about Native Americans as ignorant savages will produce a different emotional response to Indians than learning about white-man's helpers. This highlights the power of writers and historians. Who writes History? Language can be a powerful tool to influence and manipulate people's emotions. For example, the United States changed the name of the Secretary of War to the Secretary of Defense in 1947, at a time when war was very unpopular, due to WWII. This is a warning that our initial emotions when studying History should not be trusted. As George Orwell put it 'He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.' (1984) However, the fact that we can be emotionally influenced need not always be an obstacle. Every piece of History can teach us something about the time it was written or the writer of the text. Our emotional reactions to words, when aware of them, can be indicators to the effect they had on the people they were intended for. The key is to keep a critical mind.

Having seen that our own emotions can often deceive us, the question arises whether it is possible to trust other people's emotions. Being German, I have a personal interest in the history of Nazi Germany. During this time, many people believed Hitler was the savior of the nation. One account tells of a mother 'who was convinced everything the Nazis did was right and essential.

¹ Chang (2003)

Nothing would shake her faith in Hitler.² Thus, when reading sources from the time, it is important to keep in mind that other's emotions are just as unreliable as our own. As human beings, we are tempted to accept things without question if they agree with our emotional stance on a subject. However, just because the piece supports your viewpoint does not mean the argumentation is good. Here it is important to use reasoning to determine quality and reliability.

Emotions can also be very influential when studying ethical issues. In Ethics, we can see that emotions are easily influenced. Take the example of euthanasia. As a German, this topic strikes close to home as many Germans go to Switzerland to die. The knowledge issue at hand is whether it is ethical to kill a person 'for their own good' instead of letting them die a natural death. An emotional approach to this topic would be to imagine the persons' sufferings, to empathize with them and to try and figure out what would be the most loving. However, when looked at from a reasoning perspective, some critical problems are seen. If euthanasia was allowed for extreme physical pain, what would stop suicide for psychological reasons? There is also the dangerous possibility of abuse of the system by relatives seeking to inherit money or doctors covering medical errors. My initial reaction was that it is wrong to kill people, for whatever reason. When analyzing where my emotions come from, this does not seem absolutely unreasonable. From my parents, my religion and my government, I have been told that murder is wrong and euthanasia seems to fit into the category of killing people. However, when I was confronted with some counterarguments such as the importance of dying a dignified death, my emotions changed. I suddenly found myself unsure, torn between both sides. This shows that emotions are very easily influenced and changed, thus making them impractical when learning about and making decisions on ethical values.

Emotions are also very much based on experience. When looking at surrogate mothers, the question arises, 'Is it ethical to let other people carry your child for you?' Depending on background, emotional reactions can be different. I had no emotions whatsoever as I had never had any contact with the subject. However, childless couples might have a different reaction. Mike and Clare Judd, for example, consider surrogacy as the 'greatest gift possible' and would strongly advocate the legalization of surrogacy in countries such as Germany and France where this is illegal. A mother might have a different reaction, judging by the fact that children have an emotional connection to the mother before birth, both the surrogate mother and the child may carry emotional trauma from the separation. Yet again, Desai strongly advocates against surrogacy as many Indian surrogate mothers die during the process. Clearly, there is a huge range of emotional reactions to the same knowledge issue based on previous experience and emotional. This poses a great problem to the reliability of emotions. It would be more advisable to approach an ethical difficulty such as surrogacy from a more detached and reasoning viewpoint as this will lead to a more balanced viewpoint. However, emotions also have their place as they can enable one to empathize with people involved, allowing a more tolerant perspective.

Another fallacy of emotions is that most of them are based on what authorities have taught us. A classic example would be the question of legalizing cannabis or other drugs. My initial emotions were very strong: NO! Drugs are harmful to people and can destroy their lives. However, when confronted my friend by the argument that drug abuse is not a major problem in the Netherlands even though some are legal, I analyzed the origins of these emotions. Having had no experience with drugs or drug addicts, my entire foundation for my emotions are my parents' and my teachers'

² Lacy, G. and Shepard, K. (2002)

warnings. This raises a critical question: how trustworthy are my authorities? In this case, my mother had experience with drugs in her youth. However, her view is very personal and limited to her experience. It might not be adequate for large-scale political decisions. There are also many cases where my parents have had no direct experience. Where have their moral values come from? Is it simply their culture or was it passed on to them by their authorities? In many cases, the origins can hardly be traced. This of course makes emotions very unreliable when pursuing knowledge in ethical issues.

Although emotions can help understand information and issues, emotions will always stay biased and personal and thus often act as a barrier to an objective assessment of a situation. Having explored both Ethics and History, it is evident that emotions can differ very much from person to person. In general, emotions are not very reliable when pursuing knowledge as our experience and upbringing strongly influence our reactions to things and they are easily influenced and manipulated.

1450 words

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